

Influence Your Circle

Retiring 2020 AHA President Joel Birdwell creates an ever-expanding circle of influence.

by *Diane Meyer*



He knew each sale lot to a T. He knew the traits to highlight for each animal, knew the additions noted on the supplement sheet. He shuffled the papers and the glossy catalog in front of him and peered over the microphone to size up the crowd one last time.

Normally, he knew what to expect from this audience; after all, he had led this annual Hereford bull sale many times before. Normally, 150 eager faces were seated and ready to start the bidding. This year he was told interest had increased; yet a mere 20 people filled the seats before the podium. This year he faced a new challenge — influencing the majority of buyers on the other end of a phone and behind a computer screen.

How do you gauge the excitement of a crowd you cannot see? How do you set the pace, know where to focus? It was an obstacle this second-generation auctioneer and cattleman from Kingfisher, Okla., addressed with a simple mantra:

“Influence your circle,” says 2020 American Hereford Association (AHA) President Joel Birdwell. “That’s all we’re asked to do in whatever the situation is. Influence who you can and who is in your circle and that can make a big difference.”

Joel applies this philosophy at home, on the AHA Board of Directors and in the livestock industry.

Round the dinner table

Creating a strong circle of influence starts with learning from and with your inner circle. Joel grew up on his family’s ranch in Fletcher, Okla., where Hereford cattle are the operation’s foundation.

Today the Birdwell operation consists of 400 registered Hereford and Angus cows Joel co-owns with his father, Jim. A former fieldman for the American Polled Hereford Association (APHA), Jim purchased the family’s first registered polled Herefords in 1972. The father-and-son duo use proven bulls to consistently breed for economically important traits for the commercial cattleman: calving ease, fertility, growth and carcass traits.

In partnership with his wife, Bridget, and her family, Joel runs 500 commercial cows and 1,500 to 2,000 head of stocker cattle on winter wheat. Around 70 bulls are sold in a spring production

sale and private treaty. Females are marketed privately throughout the year and in a joint fall production sale. Working quarter horses are also part of the offering.

Growing up, Joel was active in the Junior Hereford Association of Oklahoma showing cattle. He traveled to Hereford sales and shows with his dad, who was building his auctioneering business after his time with the APHA. There is no doubt, Joel says, his upbringing influenced what he wanted to do for a living.

His passion for the livestock industry grew at Oklahoma State University (OSU). The animal science major with a business option competed on the 1995 livestock judging team under the mentorship of Mark Johnson, who also headed up the OSU purebred cattle operation. For six years, Joel managed the purebred cows at the university and gained experience in every aspect of the cattle business. Cindy Pribil, who ran the beef barn at the time, remains a close friend and partner in the Birdwells' spring production sale.

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Being raised in the Hereford breed inspired Joel to pursue his passion for cattle as a career.



“We are so proud of how Joel has represented our family in the Hereford breed and it is a great honor to have our family included in Hereford history because of his leadership. We are all proud a young man like Joel had an opportunity to lead an association like the AHA.”

— Jim Birdwell



Joel partners with his father, Jim Birdwell (pictured above, right), on the family's registered Hereford and Angus cattle operation.



The Birdwell family (pictured l to r): Jarret, Jhett, Bridget, Joel and Jud.

Following his dad's lead, Joel hopes to influence his sons Jarret (18), Jud (16) and Jhett (13), to have faith in God and to value family, integrity and honesty.

"I want them to realize things you do are important, but your character and your integrity and your honesty are what's most important," he says. "My dad is that kind of example to me, and I see how people respect him because of his integrity and his character. I hope I can be that kind of influence on my boys."

All three boys are athletes and play a big part in the cattle operation. Whether or not they return to the cattle business, Joel hopes they share their respect for agriculture with their own circles.

"I hope they have an appreciation for agriculture and realize the importance of it and

advocate for it," he says. "It goes back to influencing who you can influence."

Round the Board room

In 2016, Joel found himself seated around a new circle of influencers as a newly elected director of the AHA Board. Along with classmates Tommy Mead, Ga., and Bruce Thomas, Mont., he set out to serve the breed he loves, honored to follow in the footsteps of those who have inspired him. "Everybody needs to give back in some way whenever they can," he says.

During his tenure, he chaired the show and sale and breed improvement committees, the latter of which he enjoyed most. A few memorable feats with which he was involved include implementing Biometric Open Language Tools (BOLT) technology into the genetic evaluation and being part of the most recent strategic planning session. In 2019, he was elected AHA president.

"It was really an honor for the people I've served with to elect me and trust me," he describes, and quickly adds, "Sure, I'm the chairman, but I don't have a bigger role in what's going on than anybody else. Whether you're chairman or it's your first year on the Board, you're just as important."

He is proud of his 11 teammates for their shared vision of the direction for the breed. "We all want to do what's best for the Association and the breed and advance Hereford cattle and Hereford people," he notes. "In my opinion, that's a great testament to the Hereford breed and the people involved with it."

With any leadership role there are sure to be some learning curves, and in this role Joel learned issues he thought were black and white actually had a lot of grey area.

"There are a lot of different operations, different scopes, different sizes, different ways people run their operations and it's all encompassed in the Association," he explains. "You have to think about



Joel extends his appreciation to the AHA Board for their hard work, help and influence. Pictured is the 2020 AHA Board of Directors.

all those different operations and how any kind of policy affects people and that's a little harder than I thought it would be, for sure."

To his successor he advises leaning on the other board members and the AHA staff, and there is no doubt the staff is going to get it done. To the full Board he extends his appreciation for their hard work, help and influence. "I could not have asked for a better group to serve with," he says.

After addressing the membership for a final time as president on Oct. 24 at the AHA Annual Membership Meeting and Conference in Kansas City, Mo., Joel will continue to extend his influence on the breed.

"I hope people take away that I took every minute of being on the Board seriously and respected every different kind of operation and person involved in the Hereford business. I hope they take away that I tried to do my best with everything they did."

Round the pastures

Working together, this retiring president is confident Hereford producers can grow the breed's role in the commercial industry.

"Efficiency, adaptability, hardiness, soundness, longevity. Those are real staples of the Hereford breed. Those are the things we've always been good at, and we can do those things better than anybody," he says.

He continues, "We've improved our calving ease. We've improved our growth. We've improved our carcass traits. People can gain those traits Herefords have always been good at and don't have

to sacrifice anywhere else. To me, that's where we're going to continue to get our foothold."

With more advancement in the last decade than he has seen in his lifetime, he stresses further growth is easily in reach by promoting commercial marketing programs and research programs. He points to breed improvement initiatives like BOLT, profit indices and the National Reference Sire Program, which have put the breed in a great position.

"We have to advance Hereford genetics in the real world and in the entire industry because that is going to drive our entire Association and every member's profitability," he says.

Full circle

When Joel proclaimed the final "sold!" to the 20 buyers before him, he was astounded to discover the sale had garnered higher averages than ever. Like their cattle, Hereford breeders proved tough and resilient through the pandemic of 2020, adapting to unknown environments to come out stronger.

"We can do more when we work together, whether it be working with others to have enough cattle for a production sale, putting a set of feeder cattle together or banding together to fund a research program," Joel reflects. "Team Hereford is all encompassing. It's everybody involved with the Hereford breed. It's the staff. It's the Board members. It's the breeders. None of us can reach everybody, by any means. Well, you don't have to reach everybody. All you have to do is influence your circle." **HW**



Birdwell Ranches uses proven bulls to consistently breed for economically important traits for the commercial cattleman.